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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PINR UNSC IR IS LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: HOW WOULD HIZBALLAH REACT TO A
RESOLUTION ON SHEBA'A?

REF: BEIRUT 711

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) A resolution of the Sheba'a Farms issue is a necessary but not sufficient step toward disarming Hizballah. Hizballah has responded to recent increased international attention on Sheba'a Farms by insisting that only complete Israeli withdrawal from "all of the occupied lands" would satisfy Hizballah's goal of liberating Lebanon. An Israeli withdrawal would undermine Hizballah's primary raison d'être for its weapons, the "resistance." It is not surprising, therefore, that Hizballah's definition of Sheba'a includes areas not claimed by the GOL itself, or that Hizballah points to other issues, such as Lebanese prisoners held in Israel or Hizballah's role in helping to "liberate" Iraq and the Palestinian territories, to further justify its existence and ensure that its weapons are included in any future national defense strategy. Furthermore, regardless of improvements in the relationship between Lebanon and Israel, Iran is unlikely to let go of its strongest strategic asset against Israel.

¶2. (C) Should Israel eventually withdraw, Hizballah will seek credit, arguing that only the threat of Hizballah's arms (vice the "soft" diplomacy used by moderate Arab states) is capable of securing victory against Israel, thereby continuing the justification for its weapons. Nevertheless, a resolution to the issue of Sheba'a Farms would go a long way toward bolstering the credibility of the Siniora government and undermining public support for the "resistance." End summary.

GOL REJECTS BILATERAL
NEGOTIATIONS

¶3. (SBU) Since the June 8 visit of French President Sarkozy and the June 9-10 visit of British Foreign Secretary David Miliband, and Israeli PM Olmert's recent public statements suggesting bilateral talks between Lebanon and Israel, the issue of Sheba'a Farms and adjoining Kfar Shouba Hills has been the focus of political discussions and public statements. Responding to Olmert's overture in a statement published on its official website, the GOL rejected a bilateral approach, insisting instead on resolving differences through existing UNSC Resolutions (informal

Embassy translation provided in paragraph 9, below). Underscoring the GOL's position, PM-Designate Siniora publicly reiterated in late March that "Lebanon will be the last Arab country to sign a peace treaty with Israel."

HIZBALLAH RAISING
THE STAKES?

¶4. (C) The head of Hizballah's parliamentary bloc, MP Mohammed Raad, in a June 10 interview on Hizballah-run al-Manar TV, said, "I believe that entering into a transitional phase and placing Sheba'a Farms under the sovereignty of international forces does not achieve the goal of regaining full sovereignty on our Lebanese territories." However, Raad expressed his support for "a real diplomatic effort to liberate Sheba'a Farms and all of the occupied lands (NFI)," saying that, "only then would we have achieved the liberation goal to which we are committed." He also criticized the GOL for "giving up claims on 30 percent of the Sheba'a territory (NFI)."

¶5. (C) Resolving Sheba'a would be a Pyrrhic victory for Hizballah. It would cost Hizballah popular support, more so than what the organization suffered when it used its arms against Lebanese during the May clashes (reftel). Ordinary, politically-disinterested Lebanese repeatedly call for resolution on Sheba'a. A resolution on Sheba'a may not draw a significant number of Hizballah supporters away, but it will empower those in the middle to take a stand against Hizballah's arms.

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¶6. (C) Hizballah has stated that disarmament is contingent upon the resolution of Sheba'a, the release of Lebanese prisoners, and the formation of a national defense strategy. Hizballah's recent rhetoric might suggest that, by expanding the definition of "occupied" territories, Hizballah is attempting to move the goal post. Many believe it is therefore critical for the UNSC to make a clear political determination on what exactly constitutes Sheba'a Farms to avoid allowing Hizballah to claim that other areas remain under Israeli occupation.

¶7. (C) However, if Israel eventually does withdraw from Sheba'a, Hizballah's goal will be to ensure that it, and not the GOL, receives credit for an eventual Israeli withdrawal from Sheba'a. Hizballah has long prided itself as being the only Arab force capable of standing up to Israel, in 2000, when Israel withdrew its forces from southern Lebanon, and again in 2006, when Hizballah scored its "divine victory" against Israel. Most recently, Hizballah took sole credit for the June 1 release of Lebanese citizen Nassim Nasr, imprisoned by Israel for espionage charges. Hizballah scoffs at Arab states that attempt to win back territories through diplomacy, and openly supports other "resistance" movements in the Palestinian territories and Iraq. If Sheba'a is resolved, Hizballah will be quick to claim that only the "stick" of its arms made a solution possible, a "stick" that should be maintained to counter future, unforeseen threats.

¶8. (C) A resolution on Sheba'a is therefore a necessary but not sufficient step toward Hizballah's disarmament. Having lost part of its "raison d'etre," Hizballah would shift its efforts instead to securing credit for again having "defeated" the Israeli occupiers to bolster its argument that its arms are still needed. After Sheba'a and the prisoners have been removed as legitimating factors, Hizballah will use its call for a national defense strategy, which President Sleiman has recently said would be acted upon after Sheba'a is resolved, to its advantage by insisting that the state still cannot defend Lebanon as Hizballah can.

¶9. (U) Informal Embassy translation of GOL statement:

Begin text. The unwavering Lebanese position is to remain committed to the Arab Peace Plan that calls for just and comprehensive peace and to move forward with the peace plan on all tracks. Concerning the pending bilateral issues between Lebanon and Israel, they are governed by international resolutions that Israel must respect, namely UNSCRs 425 and 1701, and are non-negotiable politically. Lebanon is trying to fully implement these two resolutions, namely the articles calling for putting an end to Israel's occupation of the Sheba'a Farms, and through implementing the solution stipulated in the 7-point plan which calls for Israel's withdrawal from the Sheba'a Farms and bringing them under UN authority until a final delineation of the borders between Lebanon and Syria is finalized.

Lebanon is not bilaterally involved in the principle of land for peace, therefore Israel's withdrawal from the territories it still occupies is mandatory, as well as that it must respect Lebanon's sovereignty over its territory, water, release the prisoners, and provide maps on the landmines and cluster bombs, according to the above mentioned resolutions. Afterwards, the armistice truce between Lebanon and Israel would go into effect. As for the remaining issues pertaining to the permanent and comprehensive plan, namely the Palestinians' right to return to their homeland, it is an Arab interest that primarily concerns Lebanon, and should be negotiated according to the Arab Peace Plan. End text.

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